

# Obstacles to Giving

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[ 0 : 00 ] You know, all my life, as long as I can remember, I've always considered myself to be one of those people that worries a lot. I've always thought to myself, well, I just am a worrier.

But more recently, I've realised that actually there are only two things, just two things ever that I worry about. First thing I worry about is those things that I probably have reason to worry about. The second is those things that I have no reason to worry about. Other than those two, I'm absolutely fine, I'm cool. Whether we consider ourselves innate worriers or not, we all worry from time to time.

And so we shouldn't be surprised that because it's such a fundamental human theme, that it appears quite a lot in the teaching of Jesus. As does, as we've said already in this series, Jesus' teaching on money.

And so it shouldn't surprise us that we find those two themes united in his teaching. That is what happens here. Worry and our relationship with money seem very closely related themes in this passage.

[ 1 : 21 ] And it's not the only time that we find that. Think, for example, of Jesus' teaching, the parable of the sower. And he talks of how the kingdom is like a farmer that goes out and sows seed.

And the seed, as he sows it, falls on different types of ground. Some of it lands in good soil and it takes root and it grows and it flourishes.

But not all seed does. And he goes on and describes how some fell on stony ground, some fell on the path. One of the things that Jesus said in that parable was that some seed fell among thorns. And he said, the thorns grew up and choked the plants. Now most of the time in Jesus' teaching, he didn't explain his parables.

I think that's what's so intriguing, what's so brilliant about his, one of the many things that's not only about what he said, but how he said it. What's so engaging. Because he didn't go on to explain it. He left it to his listeners, his readers, to think it through and figure it out for ourselves.

[ 2 : 34 ] But this is one of those rare occasions where Jesus actually gives an explanation as to what the parable means. And as he goes on and talks about the thorns, he says, The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears God's word, but, and listen to this, the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

What a powerful, powerful image. That Jesus has this image of God's intentions, his purposes for us. He wants us to live life to the full.

He wants us to flourish. But that growth, that flourishing can be choked. That's the image he uses. Choked. Choked. By the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

Worry and wealth in the same sentence. And so, Jesus goes on to say that if we want to know what this really looks like, what it means in our own individual lives, we need to ask this question.

Or rather reflect on these words. Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. Where you experience anxiety or worry, ask yourself that question and it will point you to where your heart really is.

[ 4 : 14 ] So before we go any further, I just want to pause just for a few moments as we pray and ask God to open up what that means to each of us. Let's pray. Lord, as we think about your word here, we hear the words of Jesus.

Where your treasure is, there your heart is also. Reveal to us, we pray, where our treasure is and where our hearts are.

Amen. Amen. We're thinking about obstacles to giving. Thinking about the theme of giving over these few weeks.

But what gets in the way? What stands in the way? What stops us? What thwarts that from happening? I want to suggest that in these words of Jesus, we find two sort of very similar things going on.

The first thing is really to do with Jesus talks about how following him basically means swimming upstream against our surrounding culture.

[ 5 : 29 ] Now there's nothing new about this. It's always been this way. But our culture, at least in the West, is inherently materialistic.

It is. It is. The constant message that we have, not just through advertising, but particularly bolstered by advertising in its many, many varied forms.

The message that we hear continually and that we are surrounded by is that you haven't got enough. You haven't. And in fact, enough is presented to us as what normal is.

But we're led to believe that we're not normal. And we won't be normal until we've got enough. But we haven't got enough. So we're not normal. Normal is always that which you have not yet got.

If you take that away, then the whole capitalist vision collapses. But don't go there. Well, actually, we are going there. It's exactly where we're going. Normal is that which we are not.

[ 6 : 37 ] And if we want to be normal, although it's an illusion, then we have to have more. But we will never get there. And that's how it works. That's how it works. That principle of continual perpetual dissatisfaction.

That sense of longing. That thing that is at the core of our humanity. That from the cradle to the grave is there because we are really craving for God. And the things that only God can give. And the things that only God can satisfy us with. That instinct won't go away. And so what we find is God's biggest rival. That materialist instinct.

That thing that tells us if only I have this or that in my life, then I just might be normal. I might be complete. I might be whole. Following Jesus means swimming upstream against that culture. And it's not easy because that culture is everywhere. The reality is we have too much. And the biggest obstacles to giving is because we have to go against those instincts that are within us and that are around us that tell us that we haven't got enough.

[ 7 : 50 ] It's about reversing that and actually realizing that we have too much. There is a bumper sticker around that simply says, he who dies with the most toys wins.

We might laugh at that. But is that not the basic message that defines our culture? A writer called Randy Elkhorn who wrote a book called The Treasure Principle that much of this series was actually based on.

I said this following analogy. I was going to put it in my own words. But I don't think I can put it as well as he does. So I'm just going to read to you. He says, take a ride with me. After a few miles, we turn off the road, pass through a gate and fall in line behind some pickup trucks.

The vehicles ahead are filled with computers, stereo systems, furniture, appliances, fishing gear, toys, you name it. Higher and higher we climb until we reach the parking lot.

There the drivers unload their cargo. Curious, you watch a man whist a computer. He staggers to the corner of the lot, then hurls his computer over the edge.

[ 9 : 10 ] Now you've got to find out what's going on. You scramble out of the car and you peer over the precipice. At the bottom of the cliff is a giant pit filled with stuff.

Finally, you understand. This is a landfill site. A junkyard. The final resting place for the things in our lives.

Sooner or later, everything we own ends up there. Christmas and birthday presents. Cars, boats and hot tubs.

Clothes, stereos and barbecues. The treasures that children quarrelled about. Friendships were lost over. Honesty was sacrificed for.

And marriages broke up over. All end up there. Later on, in the same book, Alcorn goes on to paint another picture.

[ 10 : 17 ] He says, imagine that you live in, your home is in, say, France. But you're visiting the United States. The countries are irrelevant. It could be anywhere. You're in another country.

The purpose of this illustration, imagine that your home is in France. You're visiting the States. And you're told that you can't take anything, anything back on the flight with you, other than the clothes that you're wearing.

Perhaps your passport. He said, what would you then do? By the way, you are allowed to earn money and to send money back onto your account back home.

But that's all you can do. Who on earth, in that situation, would decide, therefore, they're going to buy as much stuff and fill and decorate their hotel room where they're staying with that stuff?

Who would go out and buy loads of antiques and furniture and wall hangings and decor and just try and fill that hotel room that they know that they're going to leave, that is not their home?

[11:22] Who would do that? Truth is, we do. If you're honest. Swimming upstream isn't necessarily, though, to do with greed.

And this is where it's far more subtle and more complex. And for that reason, I think, more challenging. Because I don't think it's naive to say that.

Actually, probably most of us wouldn't consider ourselves to be particularly greedy. And yet, we still find it hard to swim against that cultural stream and to resist the materialism and that instinct that surrounds us.

I'd like to suggest that it's not so much, perhaps, necessarily to do with greed, but more to do with a sense of worry. And here we come to those words of Jesus. That sense of worry that holds us back from giving.

We think to ourselves that if we give, then somehow we're going to compromise the security of our future. Are we going to be okay if we let go of this and if we give it to God and if we trust in that kind of way?

[12:44] That inherent worry. Are we going to have enough? And therefore, we resist that openness to giving that God wants for us in order to truly flourish as human beings that are daily dependent on him.

What's the answer to that? Well, Jesus gives us a really, really, really helpful answer here.

He points us to God. In one sentence, one sentence, Jesus starts to pile up the images of who God is and what God is like and why we can trust him when we're feeling worried about our future and when that becomes an obstacle to our giving.

Could we, perhaps, Luke 12, 32, which we just had back up on the screen there. Thank you. In that one sentence, Jesus piles up three images of God.

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. We've got three images of God there. Firstly, we've got the reference to the flock of sheep, the shepherd, God our shepherd.

[13:58] Secondly, God our father and then the reference to the kingdom, God as king. Let's just think about those because they're really, really important when it comes to this subject. First thing, we're to understand that God is like a shepherd.

Don't be afraid, little flock. When I was training for ministry in the late 1990s, I can remember that in our postural care studies, we were told that we would be really careful when it comes to using language like this to talk about people as sheep.

Because sheep are kind of stupid creatures and it's not exactly a helpful thing, perhaps, to talk about people in that kind of way.

You know, I won't deny that sheep are stupid. Before I came here, we were in Mid-Devon for eight years working in a farming community.

The house where we lived was surrounded on all sides by fields full of sheep. So I saw quite a lot of sheep. In fact, I'm not sure if it's true that there are more sheep than people in Devon.

[15:17] But sometimes it felt like it because all you could see is sheep in all directions. And they would behave in the most stupid way. They would be, suddenly, two of them would suddenly start fighting over something and you couldn't quite work out why.

And then they'd forget about that and they'd start fighting with somebody else. One would bolt off in one direction and all the others would follow. And then they'd suddenly stop and then another one would run off and then they would all follow. I can remember, on more than one occasion, dairy farmers telling me that they would never, ever even consider farming sheep.

And couldn't understand how anyone could do so because you needed so much patience.

Basically, because they're stupid. So when it comes to using that image, and let's remember, the word pastor and pastoral are all to do with that image.

When it comes to that, it's perhaps, we can find that quite difficult. To think of ourselves as sheep. If they're stupid. Well, we've got to get over it.

Because we are. We live in a culture which is stupid. Where we chase over things that really, frankly, ultimately aren't important. And yet we think, ah. But Jesus isn't saying this to tell us that we're stupid.

[16:27] He's telling us to point to God. Who is like the shepherd. A shepherd who, even though the sheep might be stupid, the shepherd knows and understands what their needs are.

The shepherd that would lay his life down to save those sheep. Even though those sheep haven't a clue what's going on. They just don't understand what the shepherd can understand.

The shepherd knows, knows what is best for them. And takes care of them. If you're worried about your future. Because it's the unknown.

It is unknown. But know this. God, according to Jesus, is like the shepherd who knows the future that we don't know. And we can trust him. For your father has been pleased to give.

Now, depending on our experience, our human experience of fatherhood, that can be a positive. It may not be a positive experience. We need to know this. Whatever our experience of fatherhood is in this life, Jesus redefines it.

[17:33] And says to us that God is like the most loving father you can ever possibly imagine. Why? Because God, as a loving father, wants the best for you.

A good parent will always, always pursue the best for their child. Even though that child may not always understand it. Even though there will be times when what the parent is trying to do will cut against every instinct that the child is going for, is pursuing.

There will be times when the child may even hate that parent because of what they're doing or telling them to do. But a decent father won't give up.

Because they know, they know that they only ever want the best for their child that they love unconditionally. Now, as human beings, we mess that up.

But God doesn't. He doesn't. God is our father who can be trusted because he knows what the best is for us.

[18:39] And will do anything for us. And last, Jesus says that the father is pleased to give us the kingdom. He is the king.

The kings have authority. They have power to get things done. And they have command over all resources. Over all resources.

And so we're invited to see all the resources that we have. Not as our own, but those that God entrusts to us. One last story and then we're going to pray. It's a story that I've shared before.

You may remember it. But it's a story about a lady who was at an airport catching a flight. The flight was late. And she was getting hungry. She remembered that she had bought with her a little box of those little tiny ring donuts.

It was about 10 or 15 or so in this packet. She remembered they were in her bag. So she scrambled around for them. And she opened up this packet and she was eating these little donuts. She put the packet on the seat.

[19:37] She was really surprised when she saw a man who sat next to her in the corner of her eye. Reached down and take one of these donuts and start to eat it. She thought, no, just imagine that.

She carried on eating her way through these donuts. And then he saw he did it again. There was no mistaking this time. He was just eating away at them. And she couldn't believe how a stranger she'd never met before could have the audacity to do this.

So she grabbed up all of the donuts except for one and stuffed them into her mouth and stared at this man fiercely while she eventually managed to eat them. The man was totally nonplussed by this.

He took the last remaining donut, broke it in half, gave her half and put the other half in his mouth and winked. She was furious. Several hours later, she was boarding her flight.

She was on the flight. She was up in the air. She opened up her bag and to her horror, she discovered one unopened pack of donuts.

[20:39] She hadn't been eating hers back at the airport. She was on the air.

She was on the air.

Help us to have courage that even though we do not know what lies ahead in the future, you do. Because you are the loving shepherd. You are the loving father and you are the loving king.

Help us to remember that you own all things. That you are the creator of all things and that there's nothing that we've got or think we've got that isn't there because you've given it to us.  
Help us to remember that everything comes from you and that you just appoint us as stewards over those things. So Lord, may we walk in freedom.

[ 22 : 18 ] Freedom to trust in you. And freedom to give knowing that we can always trust in you. In Jesus' name.

Amen.